



OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK

REPORT

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council **DATE:** June 30, 1992
FROM: Charles G. Abdelnour, City Clerk **REPORT NO.:** CC-92-01
SUBJECT: MOVING COUNCIL ELECTION TO STATEWIDE BALLOT

ISSUE

On February 11, 1992 during City Council discussion of propositions for the June 3 ballot, several Councilmembers expressed interest in a Charter amendment to switch City Council elections to the statewide primary and general elections held in even-numbered years.

Council directed the City Clerk to report back to Council regarding this proposal in time for consideration for the November 3, 1992 ballot.

BACKGROUND

Section 12 of the City Charter establishes the third Tuesday of September and first Tuesday in November in odd-numbered years as the election dates for City Council offices.

Up until 1984, elections for Mayor and City Attorney were held on those dates as well. The Mayor's race was included with elections for Council Districts 2,4,6 and 8; the City Attorney in the alternate two years with Council Districts 1,3,5 and 7.

In November, 1975, the voters approved a Charter amendment that switched the elections for Mayor and City Attorney to the statewide primary and general elections held in even-numbered years, beginning in 1984. To effect this change, the City Attorney's election in 1977 was for an extended seven-year term, while the Mayor's race in 1979 was for an extended five-year term.

The arguments in favor of that successful Charter amendment proposition included:

Recognition of the City's top elected office;

Lower cost;

Increased voter turnout; and

Provided all eight members of the Council an equal opportunity to run for the office of Mayor without having to forfeit their Council seat.

The idea of switching the City Council elections as well to the statewide primary and general has been the subject of occasional debate in past years.

In general, proponents of the change have cited the lower election costs and higher voter participation of the statewide ballot. Meanwhile, opponents have argued the City is better served by the higher profile and public focus provided by stand-alone Council elections.

We have outlined below the various arguments articulated in past discussions on this issue and, when possible, attempted to quantify the points raised.

Costs

Proponents have argued the switch would result in lower election costs.

The cost of consolidating a Council District election with the statewide primary is approximately one-ninth (1/9th) the cost of the same election in the odd-year. Currently, the average cost per Council District for elections held in odd-years is \$110,000. If consolidated with the statewide ballot in even-years, the cost of the same election would be approximately \$15,000. Over the City's four-year election cycle, this would result in minimum savings estimated at \$750,000, plus approximately \$90,000 per district additional savings for any run-off elections required.

Voter Turnout

Proponents have argued the switch would result in greater voter participation.

Over the last three statewide primary elections, voter turnout in the City has averaged 42 percent. In the statewide general, voter turnouts averaged 59 percent.

In the last three City Council primaries, voter turnout in the four districts up for election have averaged 24 percent. In November run-offs, turnout averaged 34 percent.

Location on Ballot

Opponents have argued that City Council races would be "buried" on the statewide ballot.

In the statewide primary, a typical City voter will be presented with about 20-25 candidate races and ballot measures. City candidate races would be found in the middle of ballot, following all federal, state, judicial, and school board offices, but before any state or local ballot measures.

Media Attention

Opponents have argued that media exposure on Council races and issues would be reduced, due to the sheer number of other local, state and federal races occurring at the same time.

Campaign Finance

Opponents have argued that competition for campaign funds would be fierce, thus City candidates would, by necessity, be forced to spend more time fundraising and less time addressing the issues.

Seeking Higher Office

Opponents also pointed out that the opportunities for Council incumbents to seek higher office without forfeiting their Council seat would be limited, as their terms would now coincide with many of those at the county, state and federal level.

Unfair Advantage

Moreover, opponents have argued, the switch would require that elections for four Council Districts coincide with those of the Mayor and City Attorney, thus providing an unfair advantage to incumbents of the other four Council Districts since they would have the opportunity to run for Mayor or City Attorney without forfeiting their Council seat.

As noted earlier in the report, equal opportunity for all eight members of the Council to run for Mayor was one of the stated arguments in favor of the 1975 Charter amendment that moved the Mayor and City Attorney elections to the even-year statewide elections.

OPTIONS

Should you, as the City Council, desire to place the matter of a Charter amendment before the voters to switch Council elections to the statewide primary and general, there are several options available. Listed below are three options that would affect current or future Council office terms no more than one year:

Option A:

Consolidate elections for Council Districts 1,3,5 and 7 with the statewide primary and general elections to be held in 1998; with elections for Districts 2,4,6 and 8 consolidated in 2000.

Effect:

Maintains staggered terms.

The next regularly scheduled Council elections for Districts 1,3,5 and 7 in September/November 1993 would be for one-time five-year terms.

Likewise, the next Council elections for Districts 2,4,6 and 8 in September/November 1995 would be for one-time five-year terms.

Beginning in year 2000, elections in Council Districts 2,4,6 and 8 would coincide with elections for Mayor and City Attorney.

Option B:

Consolidate all Council District elections with the statewide primary and general elections to be held in 1998.

Effect:

Elimination of staggered terms.

Regularly scheduled Council elections for Districts 1,3,5 and 7 in September/November of 1993 would be for one-time five-year terms.

Regularly scheduled Council elections for Districts 2,4,6 and 8 in September/November 1995 would be for one-time three-year terms.

This would establish all Council elections in the alternate even-numbered years separate from the Mayor and City Attorney elections. Council elections would coincide with the Gubernatorial election; Mayor and City Attorney with the Presidential election.

Option C:

Consolidate Council elections for Districts 1,3,5 and 7 with the statewide elections in 1994.
Consolidate elections for District 2,4,6 and 8 with statewide elections in 1996.

Effects:

Accelerates the timing of the switch to even-year elections.

Maintains staggered terms.

Requires the current terms of all sitting Councilmembers be extended one year.

Beginning in 1996, elections for Council Districts 2,4,6, and 8 would coincide, as in Option 1, with the Mayor and City Attorney elections.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, moving Council elections to the statewide ballot would result in significant cost savings and higher voter turnout, however, the City Council candidates and issues would likely lose the level of public focus and attention now enjoyed under odd-year elections. The switch would also require one-time adjustments to Council office terms.

I hope this information is of some assistance in your deliberations regarding this matter.



Charles G. Abdelnour
City Clerk